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Commentary

Are We Kidding Ourselves That Research Leads Practice?

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Abstract

The importance of learning from practice is underscored by the analysis in the articles on innovation and development in urban planning of this journal's thematic issue.

Keywords

innovation; research; urban planning

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Innovations and Development in Urban Planning Scholarship and Research” edited by Thomas W. Sanchez (Virginia Tech, USA).

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1. Introduction

In this thematic issue, the editors and authors seek to interrogate if a better understanding of urban planning research activities can help to better understand the direction of planning practice. The five subjects analyzed—planning's boundary with urban design, planning for disability, researchers' use of Twitter, security in urban space, and temporary uses—are an eclectic snapshot, but they reveal key dimensions of the relationship of planning scholarship to planning practice.

Maybe most loudly, these articles show us that scholarship is often far from the driver's seat when it comes to innovation in planning. All five discuss subjects that have been on the mind of practicing planners for years, yet the authors seem to show us that researchers are only now, slowly, picking up key aspects of the subjects for in-depth investigation.

2. Research and Practice

Rivera's (2021) position is that planners have been reluctant to attend to design. She shows how a Texas NGO creates knowledge through design practice and calls for planning educators to more meaningfully integrate planning and design. The argument is persuasive, even if it should be obvious. How can it be that more than thirty

years after the early New Urbanist voices we still speak of policy-oriented, and design-oriented planning schools, and policy-oriented and design-oriented national planning cultures?

Terashima and Clark (2021) find that five key planning journals each publish less than two articles per decade focused on planning for persons with disabilities. Could it be that this literature is found in specialized journals and only seldom breaks into our discipline-wide outlets? If not, how do we explain that twenty-nine years after the (U.S.) Americans with Disabilities Act, and despite wide-ranging adaptations in transit, building construction, universal design, and neighborhood design, these leading planning journals do not find more than a trickle of valuable research on how planning can better serve those who differ from the norm?

Planning researchers have been slower to adopt Twitter than planning practitioners have been. I suspect that many scholars wear this Luddite theme as a badge of pride, while secretly wondering if they are missing out on a tool that could advance uptake and use of their work. Sanchez (2021) puts their fears to rest, finding that, a half million tweets in, those researchers who are active in Twitter are no more or less cited than those who are not active. Yet, he warns us that the real value of Twitter may be in communication and network building, values we might ignore at our peril.

Töppel and Reichel (2021) illustrate a promising technique for qualitative surveying of attitudes toward safety in public spaces. Hybrid mapping has convincing potential for developing reliable inter-subjective assessments of perceptions of security. This is a welcome addition to the well-developed research on defensible space, yet these authors reveal that even in this well-developed field:

Knowledge about structural and spatial factors named and discussed in the literature is usually not taken from systematic, empirical, or social science studies. Rather, the authors refer to experiences from police practice, in particular to results of simple inspections carried out by police experts with city planners and citizens. (Töppel & Reichel, 2021, p. 106)

Temporary uses launched on the planning scene in dramatic new ways two decades ago, and in recent years, have become major sources of housing and land use debates. Planning researchers have recognized the importance of these controversies and several of the most highly-cited articles in planning journals have examined aspects of these phenomena. Chang (2021) examines this research by asking how the framing of the concepts lead to patterns of use. The author reminds us that when new fields develop, word choice in description is influential.

3. Conclusion

Those of us schooled in the intricacies of empirical research like to believe that innovation most often occurs

in research settings and that the practice world frequently lags behind. The five articles in this thematic issue should serve as a cautionary for us. Lots of innovation happens in the field; researchers are often scrambling to understand and make sense of what practitioners are already doing. This should not surprise us—the planning practice world exists in the midst of rapidly changing physical and policy realities; planning practitioners are frequently put in the position of inventing action to cope. If research is to meaningfully contribute, we researchers have to keep the lines of communication with practice open.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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